DEVELOPER RETROSPECTIVE

Allen Pilgrim and the Early Epic MegaGames Era

Written February 7, 2026

© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

Introduction

This retrospective is a chronicle of the creative journey of Allen Pilgrim — game designer and programmer — whose work helped shape the legacy of Epic MegaGames. From contest-winning *ZZT worlds* to full-scale creations like the Galaxian-style shoot 'em up *Kiloblaster* and the platformer *Xargon*, Allen's contributions reflect the spirit of early shareware development: inventive, personal, and deeply collaborative.

How I Connected with Epic

In 1991, while living in Yreka, California, I discovered *ZZT* in a shareware catalog. It was an ASCII-based adventure game with a built-in editor — a rarity at the time. I created two worlds. My first creation was *City of Hope*. My wife, Katrina, encouraged me to enter it into the game design contest. Skeptical, I built a second game from scratch, *Fantasy*, and submitted them both.

Tim Sweeney, president of Potomac Computer Systems, wrote back:

> **"Your games are definitely the best so far — creative and very refreshing."**

He returned my payment for the new trilogy and offered me a role writing *Monster Zoo*, the third game in the *Super ZZT* series. He also offered a generous share of the profits. That letter marked the beginning of my professional journey in game development.

Monster Zoo and Early Collaboration

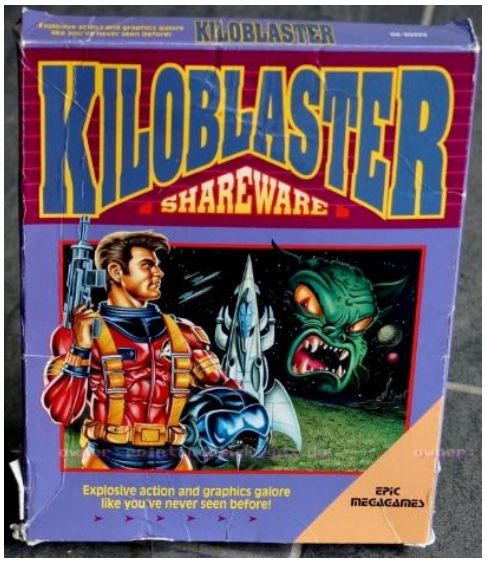
Tim liked *Monster Zoo* so much that it became the shareware flagship — the game used to promote the trilogy. While I was still working on it, Tim saw potential in my design and programming skills. Before *Monster Zoo* was even finished, we agreed I would develop *Kiloblaster*.

At the time, Epic was still Potomac Computer Systems. It would soon become Epic MegaGames — and eventually just Epic.

© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

Kiloblaster: My First Full Game

Released in 1992, Kiloblaster is a fast, colorful MS-DOS space-shooter trilogy inspired by Galaxian, but expanded with vertical movement, power-ups, more aggressive enemy patterns, and vibrant VGA graphics.



Episodes

1. *Death of a Starship*
2. *No Way Out*
3. *The Final Battle*

Gameplay Features

- 90 levels total
- Vertical + horizontal movement
- Multi-hit enemies
- Hazards: bullets, mines, lasers
- Powerups: apples (health), bananas (score), strawberries (wingmen), spinach (invincibility), missile rings
- VGA/EGA graphics
- Sound Blaster/AdLib audio
- Joystick support

Development Notes

I learned C while building *Kiloblaster*. Prior to that my only real experience was programming in BASIC.

- I informed Tim that I had zero experience with C.
- He asked me to purchase a copy and start learning. He was determined to have me work on this game with him. I purchased "Borland's Turbo C" and began studying.
- Journal entry from October 10, 1991: Tim sent me the source code for "Jill of the Jungle." I looked at it and can't even begin to comprehend it. He also gave me one of Apogee Software's new games called, "Duke Nukem." It is by far the most incredible game I've ever seen. The graphics are amazing and it has a great deal of original creatures and terrain.
- Modified Journal entry from October 21, 1991: Tim helped me learn C by sending me a program that moved a dot around on the screen. He sent the source code, which was just over a page long. Note: This is just more evidence of what a generous person Tim is.

© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

- Over the next month, I expanded my knowledge. I created an image of the infamous "Space Invader" and was able to put that in the game and move it around. There was no check for the boundary yet so it would go off the screen. I then animated my "Space Invader."
- The real challenge occurred when I added a background and my Space Invader just smeared it. That's when I called Tim and he told me that I needed to learn about *Dual Paging*.
- **Closely held secret**: I borrowed the code for one of Tim's random generators and used it on some of my spaceships. If you've played *Kiloblaster* you probably have noticed some with erratic behavior that is different every time you play the game. I used that same random generator code for some of the enemies in *Xargon*. Now you know.

Tim and I worked closely — he provided feedback, encouragement, and humor. Here is just one example.

> **"Hi Allen. KiloBlaster looks **)}> AWESOME. <{(** Congratulations to you for putting together this truly awesome game! Let's take Apogee!"**

Kiloblaster Contributors included:

- **Allen Pilgrim** — Programming and Game Design
- **Dan Froelich** — Music and Sound Effects
- **Samuel Goldstein** — Ray-Traced Backgrounds
- **Bryon Nieman** — Animated Sequences
- **Katrina Pilgrim** (wife) — Support and Encouragement
- **Jeff Pilgrim** (brother, deceased) — Beta Tester and Ideas Contributor
- **Tim Sweeney** — Collaborator and creative partner throughout the development of *Kiloblaster*.

© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

Behind the Credits: Letters, Laughs, and Collaboration

The development of *Kiloblaster* wasn't just about code and assets — it was shaped by a steady stream of letters, jokes, and encouragement from Tim Sweeney. His personality showed through in everything he sent, from playful credit lines to thoughtful feedback.

One of my favorite touches appears in the official *Kiloblaster* documentation (KILO.DOC), where Tim gave himself a humorous credit line:

> **"Still stuck on level 29: Tim Sweeney"**

That humor carried into his letters as well. As Kiloblaster neared completion, he wrote:

> **"Congratulations to you for putting together this truly awesome game! Let's take Apogee!"**

Tim was juggling his own major project at the time — *Jill of the Jungle*. In one letter, he gave me a glimpse into his world:

> **"Still making progress on Jill of the Jungle... At long last, the code is nearly finished and I'm at the fun stage of creating lots of levels (probably 60 or more). We're having some very good warm weather... I have the week off from school."**

He was also wrapping up *Best of ZZT*:

> **"I'm putting the final touches on Best of ZZT... The six best authors (among them, you) get a token $100 prize..."**

And he never missed a chance to encourage me:

> **"KiloBlaster looks fantastic already, so I can't wait to see the one you have now! Keep up the great work."**

These letters show Tim not just as a producer or programmer, but as a collaborator and friend — someone balancing school, coding, and the early days of Epic while still taking the time to motivate and support the people working with him. They were a huge part of the creative energy behind all our projects, and they remain some of my favorite memories from that era.

© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

Xargon: Overview of the Game

Released in 1993, **Xargon** is a side-scrolling MS-DOS platformer trilogy that blends action, exploration, puzzles, and story-driven worldbuilding. Built on a custom engine, the game features large, colorful levels, environmental traps, hidden areas, and a surreal atmosphere shaped by ancient ruins, strange creatures, and the mysterious Blue Builders.

Episodes

1. *Beyond Reality*
2. *The Secret Chamber*
3. *Xargon's Fury*

Gameplay Features

- Large, multi-screen levels with branching paths.
- Environmental hazards: spikes, spears, smashers, falling boxes, underwater zones.
- Collectibles: emeralds, keys, pool balls, bonus items.
- Purchase health and upgraded weapons by collecting emeralds.
- Weapons and upgrades, including the iconic *red fireball*.
- Hidden rooms and secrets.
- Story sequences between levels via Malvineous' Journal on the map.
- VGA graphics with detailed tiles and animations.
- Sound Blaster/AdLib music and effects by Dan Froelich.

Design Goals

Xargon aimed to deliver:

- A sense of mystery and discovery.
- A world that felt ancient, dangerous, and alive.
- Platforming that was inspired by the best DOS titles of the era.
- A narrative that gave purpose to the player's journey.
- A balance of action, exploration, and puzzle-solving.

Development Notes

- Built as a spiritual successor to *Kiloblaster* but in a completely different genre.
- Combined contributions from multiple artists, each bringing their own style.
- Featured a more ambitious story and world than previous Epic titles.
- Designed and programmed by Allen Pilgrim.

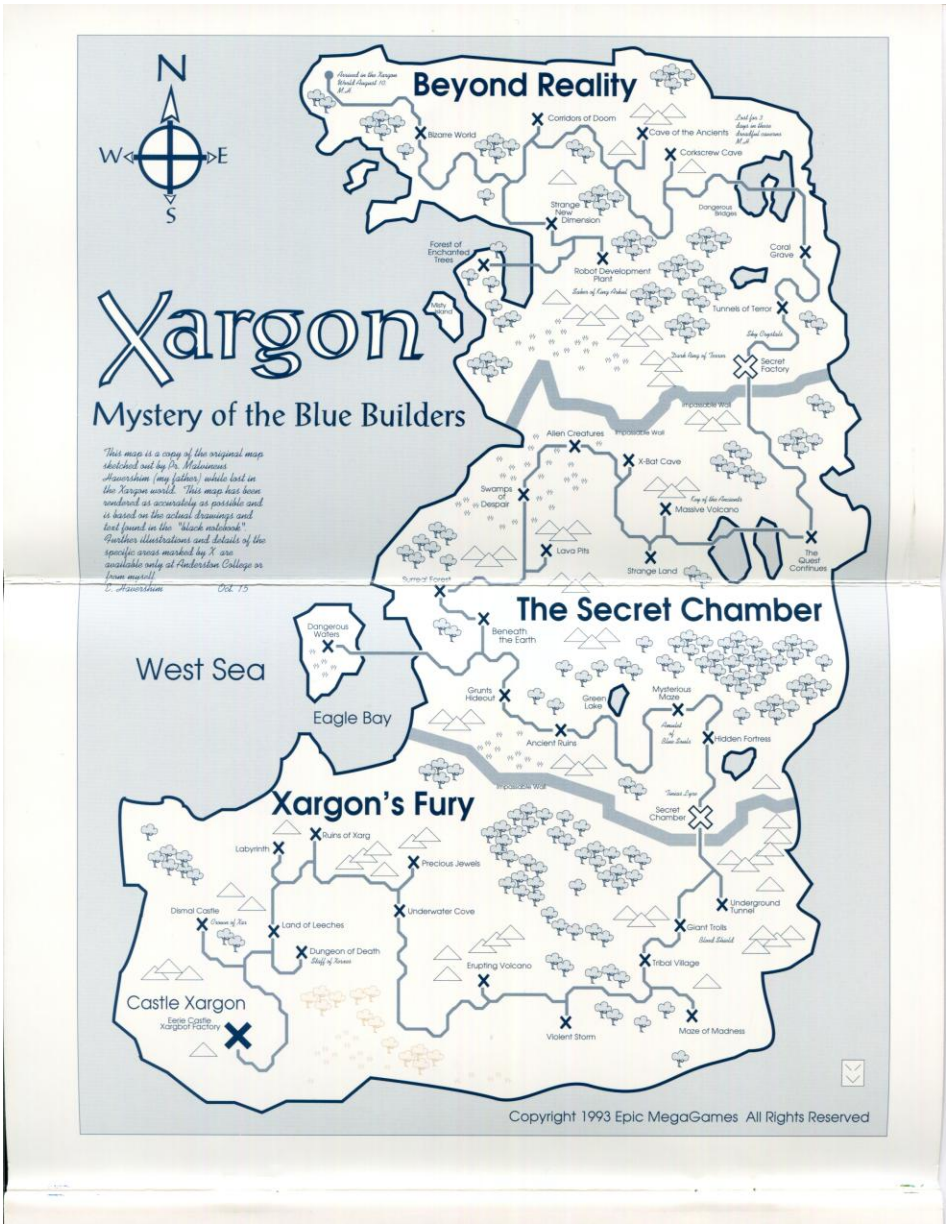
© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

Xargon: Inspirations and Design Origins

When designing *Xargon*, I drew inspiration from many games and sources:

- **Duke Nukem** → falling boxes
- **Sonic the Hedgehog** → spikes from ground and ceiling
    - Tim gave me a Sega Genesis specifically for inspiration — I still have it.
- **Indiana Jones** → spears, mashers, trap-based hazards
- **Commander Keen, Cosmo's Cosmic Adventure, Dark Ages** → platforming feel
- I was a big Apogee fan, and that influence was visible throughout the game.

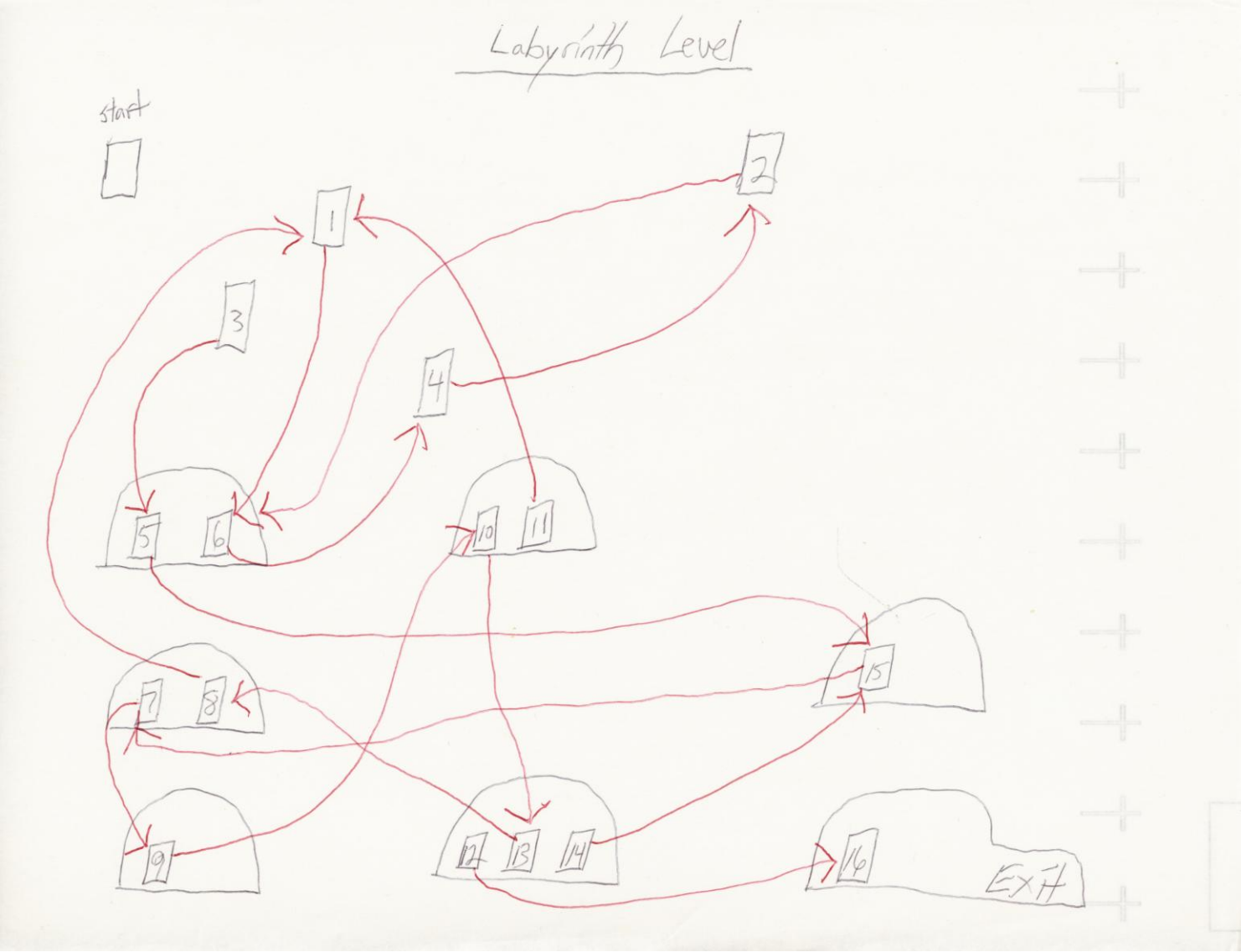
The "pool balls" collectible mechanic may have been inspired by something Tim used in *Jill of the Jungle*, where collecting items in order yielded bonus points.



© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

Labyrinth Level

This is my hand-drawn solution to the Labyrinth Level.



One of the many encouraging notes from Tim Sweeney during the development of Xargon.

For ALLEN:

First of all:

Great work! The levels you've created so far are a lot more fun than Duke Nukum and Cosmo. They're lots of fun already, and they'll be even better once you add new weapons and enemies.

© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

The Lore of Xargon: Malvineous Havershim and the Blue Builders

The story of *Xargon* was built collaboratively, but the foundation came from a beautifully written narrative by **Joe Hitchens**. His draft introduced:

- **Malvineous Havershim** — archaeologist and adventurer
- **The Blue Builders** — ancient civilization with mysterious blue structures
- **The Portal Event** — Havershim is transported to another world after inhaling a strange green gas in a Builder ruin

Joe's writing was atmospheric, cinematic, and became the backbone of the game's lore. He even added:

> **"Allen, the intro story text should really be changed to what is written here. Let me know if it's a big hassle..."**

We made it work.

Main Character: Malvineous Havershim, Archeologist and adventurer

This is the story of Malvineous Havershim. Trapped in a fantastic world of bizarre creatures and landscapes. Permeated by evil. Ruled by the one known as Xargon!

Malvineous' adventures begin on the completely normal planet of earth, in the completely real forests of Madagascar, during an entirely ordinary research trip to explore the ruins of a newly discovered people called the 'Blue Builders'.

It's a bright, hot day in the forest. The sounds of insects wash through the air, and the calls of exotic birds and unseen animals can be heard echoing through the trees.

Mr. Havershim is an archaeologist. He travels to distant parts of the world to study the lives and behaviors of ancient peoples. The 'Blue Builders' are named by their discoverers because they constructed a number of blue-colored structures whose significance has yet to be understood.

© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

Only the loudest shrieks of the loudest birds penetrate the silence of this ancient place.

Deep inside one of the more interesting blue structures Malvineous studies the minute inscriptions etched into the stone wall of what he believes to be some sort of burial marker. His figure is lit by the cool blue light of a single electric lantern.

High above and around him, immense stone heads loom ominously with the faces of halfreal and half-imaginary monsters. The faces are turned towards the large blue structure and appear to be studying Havershim's small, quiet work.

Havershim scratches at the tiny symbols in the wall, trying to clear the mold and dust so that he might see them better. He is so involved in his work that he doesn't notice when a shift of his weight causes the long, thin slab of stone on which he stands to rock almost imperceptibly to a new position. As he strains to make out the characters, he scribbles his translation into a small, brown notebook, occasionally stopping to refer to a large black notebook with the fruits of earlier research.

A thin, green gas begins seeping from thousands of tiny holes in the stone around the large diamond-shaped area covered with the symbols Havershim studies. It slowly fills the enclosed room. . . so slowly that no ordinary person would detect it. Havershim soon becomes hot and he finds it difficult to focus on the symbols.

"I need a rest," he thinks to himself. He turns and sits against the stone wall trying to clear his head of the strange buzzing sound that seems to have begun there. As he leans back, looking up at the nightmarish faces lit from below by his tiny, bright light, he notices that the faces seem to be moving and shifting very slowly. The faces seem to be melting together. His head begins to feel heavy as he starts to lose touch with reality. Small lights appear in the air before him. The last thing Havershim sees is what appears to be the face of a great brown eagle coming toward him. Malvineous has just been taken to another world by the 'Blue Builders'.

What force is behind this? And where is Malvineous Havershim now? Prepare to embark on an unforgettable journey!

© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

Xargon: Creative Team & Their Contributions

Allen Pilgrim

- Designer, programmer, and creator of Xargon, responsible for the game's core engine, gameplay systems, level design, and overall vision.
- Created the game's custom platformer engine, building on knowledge from Kiloblaster and applying new techniques such as dual-paging, sprite handling, and animation systems.
- Designed and implemented every level, crafting the pacing, secrets, hazards, and exploration-driven structure that defined the trilogy.
- Integrated and refined the work of multiple artists, ensuring that graphics, tiles, enemies, and interactive elements functioned smoothly within the engine.
- Adapted and expanded the lore and story framework provided by Joe Hitchens, shaping it into the final in-game narrative.
- Coordinated contributions from the entire creative team — artists, writers, musicians, and collaborators — while maintaining a cohesive style and tone.
- Balanced development with learning new programming concepts, often working late into the night to bring the game to life.
- Released the registered versions and source code as freeware in 2008, helping preserve the game's legacy for future players and developers.

Joe Hitchens

- Primary artist for Xargon, responsible for the majority of the game's visual identity.
- Created Malvineous Havershim, Silvertongue the Eagle, and most of the enemies.
- Designed and animated key gameplay elements such as the elevator, moving platforms, mashers, spikes, and other interactive features.
- Produced the majority of the tiles, shaping the look and feel of every environment.
- Refined and touched up most of Dan Froelich's graphics before they were integrated into the game.
- Created the Super-Xargbots, expanding on Dan's original Xargbot designs.
- Authored the foundational lore that became the backbone of the game's story.
- Worked primarily in .png format.

Dan Froelich

- Composer and sound designer for Xargon, writing and producing all the game's music and sound effects.
- Created a substantial amount of in-game art, including the Xargbots, blue fish, SUP (Submersible Underwater Pod), torches, and the boulder.
- Designed the majority of the bonus items, including the iconic emeralds.

© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

- Produced most of the tiles used in the Robot Factory, giving that area its distinct mechanical style.
- Contributed a wide variety of additional tiles that formed the foundation for many environments.
- Shared his artwork primarily in .gif format, which Joe later refined for final integration.

Carolly Hauksdottir

- Created the story graphics that introduced players to the world of Xargon.
- Produced the ending artwork, giving the trilogy its final visual narrative moment.
- Contributed a distinct artistic style that complemented the work of both Dan and Joe.
- Helped define the visual tone of the game's storytelling sequences.

Matt Berger

- Created the robot artwork and animations, giving the mechanical enemies their distinctive look and movement.
- Contributed additional support and collaboration across the project wherever needed.
- Brought a complementary visual style that blended smoothly with the work of the other artists.

Tim Sweeney

- Served as collaborator and creative partner throughout the development of Xargon.
- Provided technical guidance, including sharing source code, teaching C concepts, and helping solve engine-level challenges.
- Offered creative support and feedback, shaping gameplay ideas and encouraging experimentation.
- Supplied inspiration materials, including the Sega Genesis used to study Sonic the Hedgehog.
- Maintained a steady stream of letters filled with humor, encouragement, and insight, which fueled the project's momentum.
- Balanced his own development work and managing his growing company while still investing deeply in the success of Xargon.

Sandy Passwaters

- Wrote the hint sheet and other supporting documents distributed with the game.
- Helped craft the ending story, refining the narrative tone and clarity.
- Authored the story for Volume 3, contributing directly to the trilogy's narrative arc.
- Compiled and organized the Xargon Manual, ensuring players had a clear, polished guide to the world and mechanics.

© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

Katrina Pilgrim

- Originated the name "Xargon", a pivotal moment in the game's identity.
    - After hearing the word "Argon" while Allen read through the dictionary, she suggested: "Why don't you just put the 'X' on the front of 'Argon'?"
    - This tied perfectly to Joe's temporary title screen graphic featuring a dramatic painted "X".
- Provided creative feedback, offering suggestions on what looked good and how to improve the game's presentation.
- Supported the project through countless late nights, staying up while Allen worked and patiently enduring many rounds of "Just five more minutes."
- Played a quiet but essential role in the game's development by offering encouragement, perspective, and emotional support.

© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

The Continuing Story of Xargon

Even decades after its original release, Xargon continues to grow, evolve, and inspire new creations. The release of the source code and original level editor opened the door for fans, modders, and developers to explore the inner workings of the game — extending its life far beyond what anyone expected. What followed has become the "Xargon afterlife," a surprising and vibrant chapter in the game's history.

Freeware Releases and Community Revival

In 2008, I released the registered versions and source code for *Kiloblaster* and *Xargon* as freeware. This opened the door for fans and preservationists to port the games to modern systems, explore the original code, and keep the worlds alive long after the DOS era had passed. That decision ultimately sparked new tools, new levels, and a renewed interest in both titles — extending their lifespan far beyond what I imagined when I first created them.

Both games remain staples of the shareware era: colorful, creative, personal projects built in a time when small teams — or even solo developers — could shape the future of PC gaming.

The Xargon Level Editor (2024 Release)

On April 2, 2024, I released the original Xargon Level Editor to the public. This marked the first time players could officially build and share their own levels using the same tools I used during development. This can be downloaded here: https://www.classicdosgames.com/game/Xargon.html. There is also some Rare Xargon Artwork on the same page.

The release included:

- A **brand-new level** I created specifically for the editor's debut.
- A **new level by John Brandon**, included in the official package.

A fan-made mini-game titled **Xargon: Uncharted Isle**, created by John Brandon using the original Xargon Level Editor, was also released to the community. This six-level adventure showcases what dedicated fans can build with the classic engine, blending faithful level design with fresh ideas. The mini-game is preserved on archive.org (https://archive.org/details/xargon-ui) and remains a great example of how Xargon continues to inspire new creations decades later.

These projects demonstrated that the world of *Xargon* still has room to grow — and that fans are eager to explore it.

© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

Modern External Level Editor by King_Duke

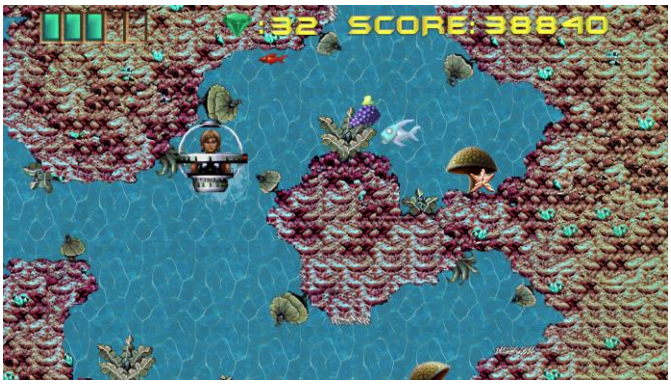
A programmer known as **King_Duke** took the exploration even further. By studying the source code I released, he reverse-engineered how the original editor functioned and built a **modern external level editor** from scratch.

His work has become an invaluable tool for the community, making level creation more accessible than ever and enabling deeper experimentation with the game's structure.

Forum: https://pckf.com/viewtopic.php?p=111259
Download: https://k1n9duk3.shikadi.net/xmod.html

Xargon Remake

Another remarkable fan-driven project comes from Yehonatan — known on YouTube as J.Xargon — who has been developing a modern reinterpretation of Xargon. His version features completely new graphics, enemies, weapons, and background art, all built on top of the original level designs. What makes his work especially impressive is that the structure and flow of the classic levels remain intact, giving the game a fresh visual identity while preserving its original gameplay spirit. I saw his project early in development and gave him permission to sell it if he ever chooses to do so. He decided to create this in Unity and sell it on Steam.

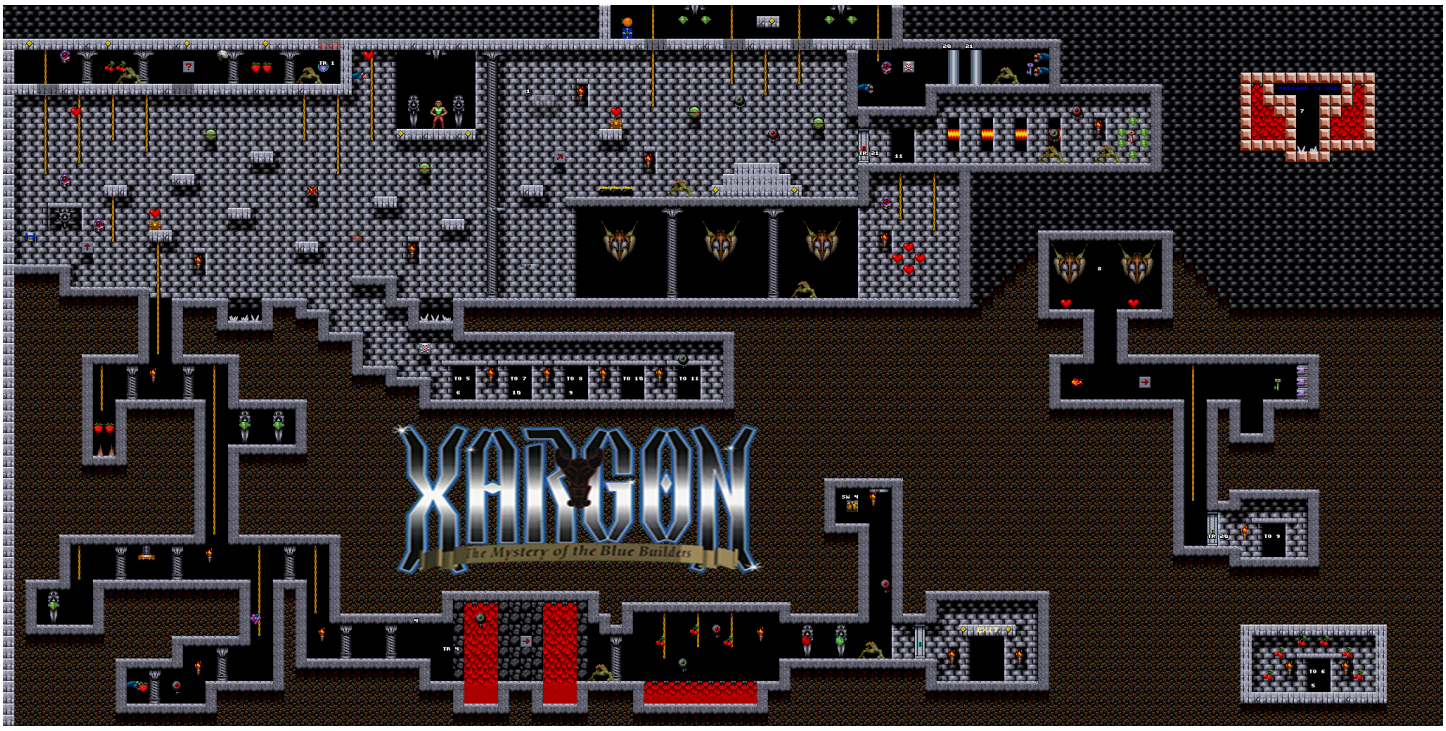


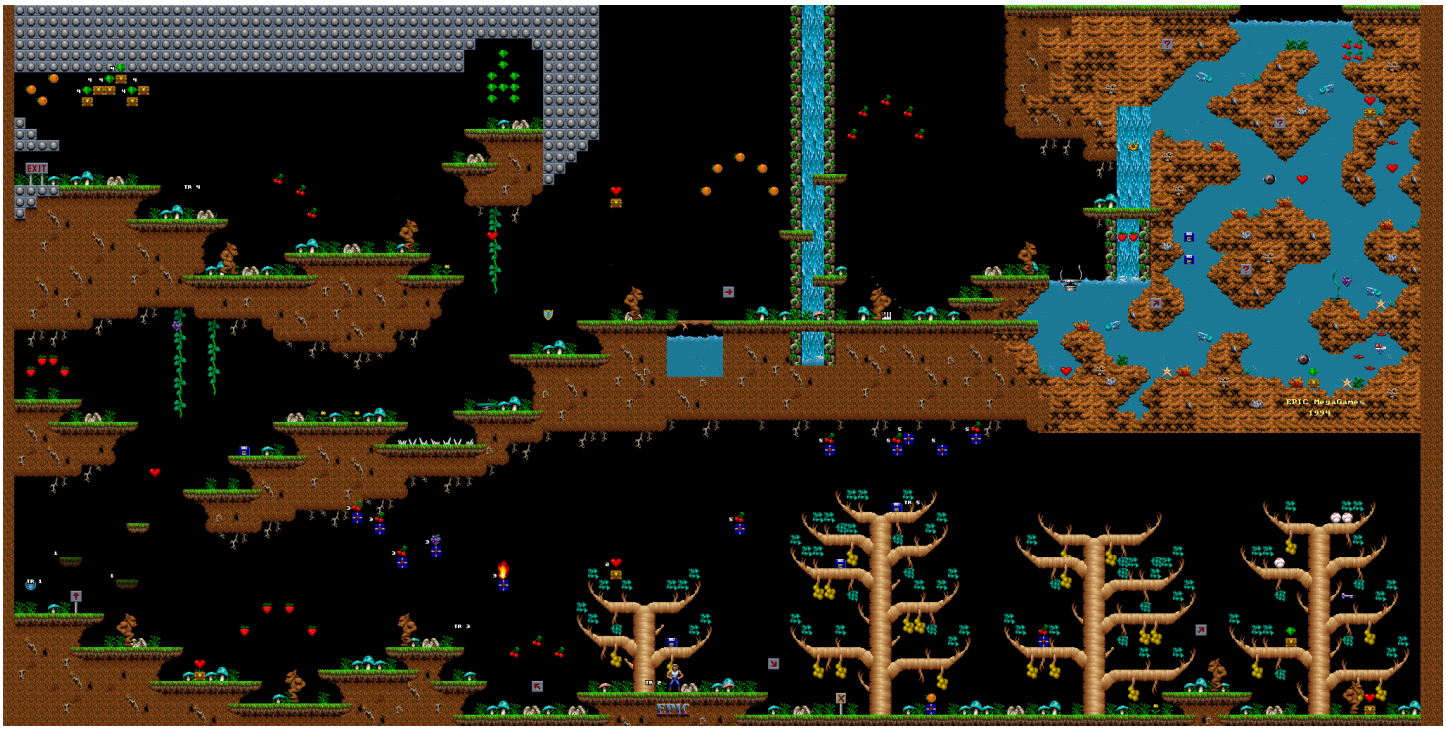
© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

Community Mapping Project

On December 1, 2012, **Ryan Armstrong** created complete maps of the entire *Xargon* trilogy. These maps provide a full visual overview of every level — caves, rooms, jungle areas, secrets, prizes, enemies, and more. They've become a key resource for players, modders, and historians alike.

https://www.zerker.ca/home/xargon-mapper-and-resource-extractor.html





© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

Preserving the Legacy

Book Release

On March 28, 2023, Richard Moss released *Shareware Heroes: The Renegades Who Redefined Gaming at the Dawn of the Internet*. The book chronicles the rise of the shareware movement and the developers who helped define it. Page 126 includes a section about my work and my collaboration with Tim Sweeney, preserving that history for a new generation of readers and retro-gaming fans.

YouTubers

The modern community has also played a major role in keeping *Xargon* alive. A YouTuber known as **Dosgamert** regularly livestreams *Xargon* and has recorded numerous playthroughs. Here's one example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_LfvdEO_UM&t=2945s. Watching players experience the game in real time — and seeing the live chat react to secrets, traps, and surprises — has been one of the most enjoyable parts of the game's afterlife. It's a reminder that even decades later, the world of *Xargon* still has the power to surprise, challenge, and entertain.

Last boss + ending: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4oqmz8j20Q

Xargon Uncharted Isle speedrun in ~5:35: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnMvGUDF6FI&t=33s

Web Sites

There are numerous websites with information about *Xargon*.

Graphics of various releases of the game: https://gamesdb.launchbox-app.com/games/details/28992-xargon

Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xargon

RGB Classic Games: https://www.classicdosgames.com/game/Xargon.html

Interview with Allen Pilgrim: https://www.classicdosgames.com/interviews/allenpilgrim.html

Lots of screenshots: https://www.myabandonware.com/game/xargon-21c

Official Facebook Group

Join others who love the Xargon Trilogy: https://www.facebook.com/groups/869137789809335

© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

Future Projects — Coming Soon… or Maybe Never

Over the years, my son **Brandon** and I have explored several new Xargon-related game ideas:

Xargon Zero

A standalone project Brandon developed on his own — a creative reimagining of the Xargon universe. Although development eventually stopped, it remains a fascinating glimpse into what a modern reinterpretation could look like. Check out this video or just search for "Xargon Zero" on YouTube and make sure it is the one made by Grimsikk: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYQzyTpdYLc&t=2s.

Unity Prototype

Together, we began building a new 2D game in Unity based on Xargon lore. As the project grew, we realized the story and world deserved a more ambitious approach.

The New Xargon Prequel (In Development)

We are now developing a **Full 3D Prequel** to the original trilogy in **Unreal Engine 5.4**. This new game will:

- Introduce a **new lead character** who fits naturally into existing Xargon lore.
- Reveal how the land was overtaken by Xargon and his minions.
- Expand the mythology surrounding the **Blue Builders**.
- Provide new insight into **Malvineous Havershim's arrival** in the world.
- Explore events that set the stage for the original trilogy.

Brandon has written all the lore for the project, and I've designed the framework and several levels. Development is still early — especially as I balance it with my full-time work as a System Administrator — but the vision is clear, and the surprises we have planned will honor the spirit of the original while expanding the universe in exciting ways.

© 2026 Allen Pilgrim

Closing Reflections

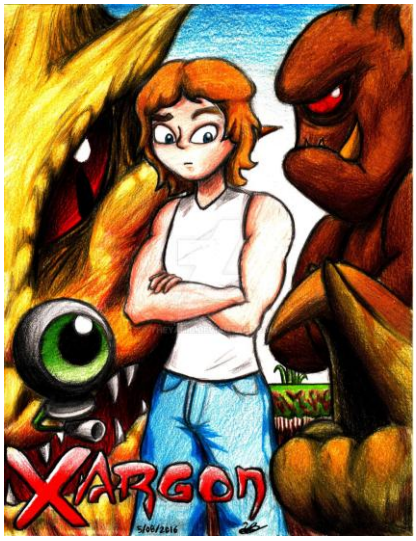
These games weren't just code — they were collaborations, experiments, and expressions of joy. They were built in an era when a single idea, a small team, and a lot of late nights could create something that reached players around the world. Every sprite, every level, every line of C was part of a shared creative adventure, shaped by friends, family, and fellow developers who believed in what we were making.

I'm proud of what we built, but even more grateful to the people who helped bring these worlds to life — the artists, musicians, writers, testers, and supporters who poured their own creativity into the projects. And I'm equally grateful to everyone who played these games, talked about them, preserved them, streamed them, mapped them, or extended them. Their enthusiasm is the reason *Xargon* still has a pulse today.

What surprises me most is how *Xargon* has continued to grow long after its original release. The community-made tools, new levels, livestreams, maps, and discussions have given it a second life — a kind of Xargon afterlife — that I never could have imagined back in the early '90s. Seeing players discover secrets, laugh at surprises, or debate lore decades later is one of the most rewarding experiences of my career.

This retrospective is my way of honoring that legacy — not just the games themselves, but the people behind them, the community that kept them alive, and the unexpected journey they've taken over the years. It's a celebration of a moment in gaming history, a thank you to everyone who was part of it, and a reminder that even small projects can leave a lasting mark.

With gratitude, Allen Pilgrim



Fan Artwork: *Malvineous and Friends* by The Yahid (May 8, 2016)

© 2026 Allen Pilgrim